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ABSTRACT

A cross-cutting analysis and examination of programs and services offered to at-risk students in the Michigan School-to-Work (STW) system used data from the STW Progress Measures Survey and Local Partnership Survey. Qualitative data were collected through focus group and individual interviews in seven Michigan Workforce Development Board (WDB) regions. Statewide data indicated that at-risk advocacy groups had little or no membership on many WDBs and minimal "official" decision-making authority related to STW partnership initiatives. Qualitative evidence found educational advisory groups had a somewhat greater degree of at-risk representation. Many WDB partnerships did not place a very high priority on serving needs of at-risk youth. Few staff were explicitly responsible for ensuring access for all students. Data suggested WDBs had the capacity to develop and funds to expand the STW system for serving at-risk youth at the partnership level. STW initiatives served only a limited number of the at-risk population. Strategies provided to at-risk students in several partnerships included portfolio development, vocational interest testing, career majors, job shadowing, and internships. No well-developed, systematic approach to serve at-risk youth in most partnerships existed. The developing STW system had a positive impact on at-risk youth, but the overall impact of the system was very low in relation to the need. Recommendations were made for state agencies and local STW partnerships. (YLB)

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CROSS CUTTING ANALYSIS STUDY FOR AT RISK YOUTH IN MICHIGAN'S SCHOOL-TO-WORK SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

This cross-cutting analysis and report on at-risk youth was prepared as part of a larger qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the Michigan School-to-Work (STW) System conducted by the W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

The major questions addressed in this cross-cutting analysis were:

- Is the governance structure and leadership of STW activities at the State and local levels aware of and supportive of the needs of at-risk youth?
- Does the "system" have the capacity to serve at-risk students? Have STW funds been used to develop and expand that capacity?
- What strategies have local agencies followed and what systems have been put in place to reach at-risk youth?
- What impacts have STW strategies had on at-risk youth?

Procedures

The quantitative data used to conduct the cross-cutting analysis and to examine programs and services offered to at-risk students comes from the following two sources:

1. ***STW Progress Measures Survey***, Michigan data June 1996; and,
2. ***Local Partnership Survey***, Michigan data, May 1997.

Qualitative data was collected through focus group and individual interviews conducted in April and May of 1997 in seven Michigan workforce

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development board regions. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with school administrators, teachers, parents, and students to obtain information for the cross-cutting analysis. The interviews were conducted by staff and subcontractors funded under the W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research STW evaluation contract.

FINDINGS

Finding #1: Governance and Leadership

Is the governance structure and leadership of STW activities at the State and local level aware of and supportive of the needs of At-risk Youth?

Statewide data indicates that at-risk advocacy groups have little or no membership on many of the workforce development boards and minimal "official" decision-making authority related to school-to-work partnership initiatives. Average governing board membership for at-risk youth advocacy groups is less than one member.

However, qualitative evidence from interviews and focus groups indicates educational advisory groups have a somewhat greater degree of at-risk representation. In fact, certain populations of at-risk youth (particularly special education students) appear to be well-represented on educational advisory committees that advise on STW programming in several different local partnerships. In different regions the amount of educational advisory committee influence on WDB decisions related to STW programming and services for at-risk youth ranged from minimal to significant.

An examination of various strategies and progress in implementing them indicated that many WDB partnerships do not place a very high priority on serving the needs of at-risk youth. For example, when comparing nine

different strategies used in local partnership development and the degree that each was accomplished, "serving out-of-school youth and other special populations" had the second lowest level of emphasis of the nine strategies rated by the respondents. In addition, the extent of progress in serving "risk youth" ranks next to the bottom of the identified local partnership approaches. Qualitative information also found that individuals often expressed lack of information and communication about STW initiatives for at-risk youth in several WDB regions.

Finding #2: System Capacity and Funding

Does the system have the capacity to serve at-risk students? Have STW funds been used to develop and expand that capacity?

Data from our interviews seems to indicate that there are few, if any staff explicitly responsible for insuring access for ***all*** students. Although there are advocates for certain segments of the at-risk population largely based on categorical funding, the overall system has a largely fragmented delivery and the real responsibility rests with individual at-risk students to find the program that can best meet their needs.

Available quantitative and qualitative data suggests that workforce development boards have the capacity to develop and the funds to expand the STW system for serving at-risk youth at the partnership-level. From the perspective of WDB providers, "including special populations in STW" was not ranked as a principal barrier in the growth and development of STW in local partnerships. WDB personnel believe that other more significant barriers exist than the system's potential to serve at-risk youth and that the system can adequately serve and address the needs of at-risk youth.

Because it is up to the local school districts to determine the extent to which eligible special education students get involved with school-to-work activities, most activities are more happenstance than planned and coordinated. In almost all of the regions, communication and coordination between special education and STW were found to be virtually nonexistent, even though both programs operated simultaneously in some communities.

Available quantitative and qualitative data indicate that at-risk youth have opportunities to participate and the partnerships do provide funding for participation in a variety of STW activities. However, when comparing data for at-risk youth served to the total number of children who are at-risk in Michigan schools it is clear that only a limited number of the at-risk population are being served through STW initiatives.

Finding 3: Strategies

What strategies have local agencies followed and what systems have been put in place to reach and expand that capacity?

A variety of partnership and school-level strategies are provided to at-risk students in several partnerships. These strategies included portfolio development, vocational interest testing, career majors, job shadowing, and a variety of internships. Many of the observed programs for at-risk youth were exemplary in nature; but, because of missing data sets, an actual comparison of the percentages of at-risk students engaged in intensive STW activities, as compared to the total population of students served could not be made. It does not appear that here is any well-developed, systematic approach to serve at-risk youth in most partnerships. Further, the relative percentages served

through STW activities appear to be far less than the total population of at-risk students currently enrolled in Michigan public schools.

Finding #4: Student Outcomes

What impacts have the STW strategies had on at-risk youth?

Although long term impacts of increasing academic achievement and improving high school completion rates for at-risk youth were not available for this study, several short-term assessment measures were obtained from student focus group interviews. These short-term assessments to measure their progress; included such variables as, attitudes toward school and work, skills utilized on the job, a sense of academic relevance, degree of motivation, and whether the activity was meeting individual needs.

This study found that students from special focus schools had the broadest sense of STW initiatives and were most keenly aware of STW benefits for them on a personal and academic basis. Students from area technology centers and alternative education facilities were able to see a direct relationship between their education and career preparation. They also clearly viewed their experiences more positively than their experiences at the regular high school. STW was seen by many students, as a motivator to stay in school, a better way to match academic skills on the job, and a vehicle for more longer-term career preparation opportunities.

Students from comprehensive high schools had a much more limited picture of STW benefits and many viewed them as being primarily short-term and monetary in nature. Most students from both special focus and comprehensive high school settings, however, were very supportive of both paid and unpaid work-based learning activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General Conclusions

The study strongly indicates that for students engaged in real school-to-work experiences, that the project is having great success. The students enjoy their STW experiences (a characteristic of effective learning environments), feel that they are learning important lessons, and finding real direction in their lives. Many of the students reporting these positive results were either high or moderately high at-risk students. For example, special education students have documented their successes for many years.

The developing STW system in Michigan has clearly had a positive impact on hundreds of at-risk youth. For students who are not primarily academically inclined, the evaluators were left with the strong impression that STW strategies were successful, and could play an important role in the success of the schools in the education of these students. We talked with students participating in STW experiences who were excited about learning and going to "school" for the first time in years. STW strategies seemed to being having a positive affect with at-risk students.

The number of students and the number of businesses participating in STW activities has clearly increased several fold, since the federally-funded STW initiative began in Michigan. However, the capacity of the current system is still only a tiny fraction of what it could be for ***all*** students let alone for those youth who are at-risk. The overall impact of the STW system is very low in relation to the need.

An expansion of the STW system is dependent on the capacity for planning and resources. First, there has to be a plan to expand the effort. Any

capacity building plans hardly seemed to exist. The state of the art at the moment is for teachers who are already working in life management education or other career and technical education programs to increase their efforts, with perhaps one additional planning period. There is no systematic plan to identify and involve all at-risk students, let alone the other "regular" students.

Secondly, resources for STW have to be identified. We saw minimal activity in the area of resource planning. Most of the educators who were directly involved were being supported largely by the short-term federal STW funds. There seems to be little or no thinking about a real change in role for thousands of educators who are already employed, and with some imagination could be working more effectively with at-risk populations.

In short, we found that: 1) STW strategies are successful and can lead more exciting learning environments for at-risk students with many at-risk enjoying success as never before; and, 2) the impact of the STW initiative has been limited for at-risk students. To date, the capacity has only been expanded very modestly in relationship to the total number of at-risk students. The evaluation team did not find evidence that systemic plans are in place to creatively use current resources to expand programs and services for at-risk students. Accordingly, the following recommendations are made:

State Agency recommendations

- Engage appropriate state departments and agencies (e.g. Michigan Jobs Commission, Special Education, Career and Technical Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, Family Independence Agency etc.), to develop a strategic plan for at-risk STW program development and implementation; establish evaluation criteria for at-risk programs and services; and, create a plan for professional development of state and local agency personnel involved with at-risk youth.

- Insure reasonable at-risk advocacy membership on workforce development governing boards.

- Mandate joint planning between alternative education providers, special education, and local service agency providers on educational advisory committees. This planning should take place before local STW grants are released to local providers.

- Establish a management information system and a data collection process to assist with decision-making and program evaluation. The system should be used for cost-benefit analysis and for conducting basic research on school-to-work activities for at-risk youth.

- Establish a process to monitor local school-to-work programs for the inclusion of at-risk youth.

Local school-to-work partnerships

- Establish a clear STW mission statement, specifically addressing services for all youth, including at-risk.

- Establish a STW educational advisory committee to develop a coordinated approach and a local strategic plan for programming and services for at-risk youth, including designation of specific personnel, available funding, and agency responsibilities.

- Increase communication and articulation between educational agency personnel who deal with at-risk youth, alternative education providers, service agencies, and the business community regarding programs and services for at-risk youth.

- Continue the expansion of career and occupational exposure based upon available businesses, community resources, student interests, abilities, and aptitudes into local programs. Service learning, job shadowing, mentoring, school-based enterprises, and if possible, paid work experiences should be part of every at-risk student's curriculum.